

Never going to grow up, not me

OPINION PIECE by Shannon E. Wall from The Globe and Mail
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I never knew what I wanted “to be when I grow up,” and I could never understand why so many people around me seemed to. Halfway through high school, after feeling like a complete washout every time I answered “I don’t know” to the

question every adult in the world asks every young person, I figured out that when I answered “a lawyer,” people shut up quite quickly. They would get this look on their faces that said, “Well, aren’t you a bright one,” even when they didn’t know me from a hole in the ground. To be honest, I didn’t know the first thing about law. But it got me off the hook in a flash, and that was all that mattered at the time.

After using this line for a few years, however, there came a point where I think I had actually fooled myself into believing I wanted to be a lawyer. I even went so far as to spend a summer working at a law firm. By the end of the summer, I had definitely found out it wasn’t my calling.

When I graduated I went travelling by myself to Europe. Sitting on an old church pew in the lobby of a hostel in the heart of Paris, it suddenly hit me: I was nothing! My greatest fears had come true. No longer could I tell

the world I was studying to be something; no longer could I dream about one day entering the “real world.” It was here! I was in it!

And I was nothing.

In the few years that followed this eye-opening episode, I worked as an English teacher (and occasional movie star) in South Korea; I ran youth programs on board a cruise ship in the Caribbean and Alaska; I sold brooms at the “world-famous” Shipshewana flea market in Indiana; I travelled to 32 countries on five continents, and I co-founded a team-building company in Victoria, B.C.

Being “nothing” worked out quite well for me.

Lately, I’ve been working with a group of teenagers at a local YMCA who’ve been struggling with the same issues I once did. About to leave high school for the frightful “real world,” becoming something has been on their minds. They’ve asked me how I got through this uncertain, exciting stage of life. “How do you know what you want to be?” they asked. “And what do you do if you just don’t know?”

I told them about the lawyer trick. They weren’t impressed. More honest, and light-years more mature than I was, they want to be true to themselves. They already know that appearances aren’t important, that what really counts is what lies deep within ourselves. But still, they struggle with the question.

I told them what it took me about 25 years to figure out. The problem isn’t us. The problem is the question.

You see, the thing they never tell us when we’re “growing up” is that we already are something, right now, just as we are. We don’t have to “grow up” to be something.

All the things we do right now—sports and music and art and even little things like hanging out with friends and reading and thinking—they are all just pieces of the mosaic each of us calls “me.” You don’t need to be a lawyer or a business person or a doctor or anything to be something in this life. You just need to be you.

I told them that once we come to realize this, well, then, a certain peace of mind washes over us. For then we can truly relax into the world and pay attention to what is going on around us and inside us. We can discover what drives us by finding out who we are and what we love. We might even realize one day that this life will be full of all kinds of different work for us. If we’re smart, we will seek out work that we love. And if we’re lucky, we will spend a good part of our lives making money by doing work that we love. But no matter what, we must remember that what we do- or what we’re going to do is not who we are. It is only a piece of who we are. It is only a part of our journey.

And here’s the truth about the question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I filled my teens in on a secret I discovered long ago: it’s what adults ask when they’re trying to make conversation. We just want to get to know them better. We want to know what excites them, what interests them the most. We are fascinated by their passions. We just don’t know how to ask properly.

So I told my teens to go ahead and tell us, if they want to. Tell us who they are right now.

Tell us what issues are spectacular enough to capture their attention, what subjects they stay up at night dreaming about.

And as for the being part? Well, tell us that you want to be happy when you grow up,

and you’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that happens.

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